

Two Sides of a Coin

CVCLAW senior partner Attorney Rodel Cruz shares how serving in the government helped him become a better lawyer

Words **Michelle Angela Carag** | Photography **Ron Mendoza**
Sittings Editor **Sophie Menor**

AN AIR OF IMPORTANCE FILLS ATTORNEY RODEL CRUZ'S OFFICE WITH ALL THE PLAQUES ON DISPLAY, FRAMED MILITARY COINS HANGING ON THE WALL AND THE HIGH STACKS OF CASE DOCUMENTS ON THE WORKTABLE WAITING TO BE REVIEWED. But what heightens that profound importance more is the fact that his office sits in the imposing confines of CVCLAW, a highly prestigious law firm in the country.

Meanwhile, the lawyer himself is an epitome of strength and power. A tall man clad in an impressive suit, one can easily perceive him to be a hard core, no-nonsense lawyer who is ready to pounce. But behind the striking presence lies a good-hearted man with an infectious sense of humor.

And, a proud product of public school education.

"Throughout my education, I attended public schools. During that time, we did not have the best facilities that private schools had but when we were competing against them in different interschool competitions, we would actually win," he shares with a warm smile.

"One good thing about studying in public schools is that you get to acquire more real life experiences, you become street smart," he stresses. "Sure, we didn't have enough books to read. But what little we had, I made sure I used them. Thriving in an environment like that made my transition to the University of the Philippines easy and gave me the drive to succeed in life."



Unsure of which way to go in his career, Attorney Rodel took up Philosophy in the Diliman campus because it worked double as a premedical and a prelaw course. So what was the turning point for finally choosing to become a lawyer? "I reflected on the things that I had to deal with every day in the hospital once I become a doctor and I realized that I was not cut out for it," he says, adding that he thought that his personality was better suited for a career in law.

RISE TO PROMINENCE

Attorney Rodel started working in CVCLAW at the ripe age of 23. After eight years, he was about to be made partner when things took a sudden turn: former president Joseph Estrada was ousted from power and a new regime formed. He says, "I accepted an invitation to work as Undersecretary to the Chief Presidential Legal Counsel in

the Office of the President. I knew then that it also meant a significant pay cut and a radical career move, but I thought that I could contribute in making the system work instead of just complaining. I also thought that whatever good we could do would help not just my children but also their generation."

Then in 2005, Attorney Avelino "Nonong" Cruz, the Defense Secretary under the Arroyo administration, asked Attorney Rodel to forego his masters in law scholarship abroad and take the job of Defense Undersecretary, making him the youngest to hold the post at the age of 34. Attorney Rodel reveals that at first he was intimidated by the offer because of two reasons: the bigger responsibility that the job entailed and the fact that he was a civilian.

"Of course, I came from the private sector and had no military background," he muses. "But the prospect of



Left: The military coins, which Attorney Rodel collected during his stint in the Department of National Defense, signify the countries that he had visited to learn strategies on how to improve the training of the Philippine military **Above:** The awards and mementos adorning every nook and corner of Attorney Rodel's office characterize his three major interests: defense, security issues and of course, the law



Above: On the tarmac after a check out flight on an OV-10 Bronco light attack aircraft over Cagayan De Oro and Bukidnon. The service life extension of vital air assets was achieved during Attorney Rodel's stint in the Defense Department, while the Philippine Air Force awaited the arrival of new acquisitions under the Capability Upgrade Program **Topright:** Receiving the highest ranking Fil-Am in the US Armed Forces, Lt. Gen. Edward Soriano, together with Defense Undersecretary Ernesto Carolina and Col. Matt Velasco, Chief of JUSMAG, at the Department of National Defense (DND) **Bottom, left to right:** Trooping the line with Lt. Gen. Jose Reyes, Commanding General of the Philippine Air Force (PAF) at Villamor Air Base • Receiving medals for graduating with honors in a public elementary school accompanied by her sister, Precy Cruz



a synergy between civilian and military cultures in the post-martial law era made the job quite an interesting challenge."

Instead of rebuking everything he learned from private practice dealing with the rehabilitation of distressed corporations, Attorney Rodel took inspiration from a young Robert McNamara, John F. Kennedy's Secretary of Defense, who also came from a private sector background.

"McNamara helped turn around the Ford Motor Company after World War II," he shares. "He introduced the management principles and systems he used in Ford into the US military, thus making it the strong institution that it is now. I felt that there was a model to be followed from McNamara so I helped apply some business principles in managing our defense establishment. I'd like to think that it helped a lot."

In return, Attorney Rodel's three-year stint in the Department of National Defense gave him a deeper understanding and greatest appreciation of our military. It is with passion that he says, "Ever since Martial

Law, our security institutions became more opaque. Civilians either feared or did not feel the need to understand our military. As a result, civilian and military engagements often became antagonistic. But the military is a vital pillar of our society. We must help strengthen this important institution if we want to succeed in turning our country around."

PUTTING IT ALL TO GOOD USE

With six years of serving in the government under his belt, perhaps the best way to describe how Attorney Rodel has turned out as a law practitioner is that he has developed a sense of duality in his practice. Having experienced being on both sides of the crossfire, he says that it has become easier for him to present solutions drawn from perspectives that may be difficult for other lawyers to see. And he is putting everything to good use—all the experiences, skills and insights he acquired along the way.

"I'm now back in the business of solving problems and it helps a lot to see a predicament from

different view points and come up with innovative solutions that not many can find," he shares with a smile. "I'm fortunate to have experienced both sides of the law early in my career: advocating the right of individuals as they are regulated by the state through law, and seeing how government uses the law as a tool for social engineering. I have also realized that

being part of the solution is not so difficult. It all begins with the right attitude—the attitude of not giving up on the future of our country whether you are in government service or in the private sector. In life, it is possible to do well for ourselves while doing good for others. If we just keep this mind set, we can turn this country around." 🏠



Above: Arriving at Pope Air Force Base in Fort Bragg, North Carolina with AFP Chief of Staff General Alexander Yano and Colonel Matt Velasco, Chief JUSMAG, as part of a trip to observe the training of elite units of the US Armed Forces **Right:** At the Pentagon Briefing Room after meeting with US Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld

